

Chapter 5

Education, poverty and social class:

some issues for teachers

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Forty years ago it was easy to believe that child poverty had disappeared from modern Britain. It belonged in the past or to distant places – images of *Oliver Twist* or African famine victims would spring to mind. It was assumed that residual poverty in Britain was largely due to idleness or alcohol.

Few can still believe this now. Despite dramatic advances in productivity associated with computer technologies, and a boom time for the super-rich, child poverty statistics are scandalous. In the UK poverty more than doubled during the 1980s (the Thatcher period), fell slowly after 2000 when the last (Labour) government set a slow pace for its disappearance, then rose again after the financial crash.

Almost a third of Britain's children are living in poverty - on average nine children in a class of thirty (Child Poverty Action Group 2018). Poverty does not only affect children entitled to free school meals (FSM), since many low-income families don't meet the exact criteria.

Poverty is more likely in lone-parent families but three-fifths of poor households have two resident parents. It is more likely if parents are unemployed, but two-thirds of children in poverty have an employed parent and often two. Many families are now affected by what has been called 'poor work', with low wages, changeable hours and insecure employment. Poverty is heavily concentrated in some cities, but often goes unnoticed in rural areas.

Poverty can affect many aspects of children's lives - health, housing, food, clothes, and even friendships. Some children come to school without any breakfast, while others survive on an unhealthy diet. Some have shoes that don't fit or sleep in damp rooms.

But poverty also has social and psychological effects, including feelings of embarrassment, shame, low self-esteem and stress. Young people become acutely aware that they cannot afford the things their classmates take for granted. Some aspects of children's experiences are well established and constantly updated by new research: already in 2002 Tess Ridge's book *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: from a child's perspective* revealed that:

- poorer children are unlikely to receive regular pocket money, which restricts their independence

- not being able to afford transport affects their opportunity to sustain friendships
- not having the right clothing affects relationships and self-esteem, and can lead to bullying
- being unable to afford school trips affects relationships with peers and teachers, as well as damaging learning
- children have to reject friends' invitations to join them in weekend activities.

Fears of loneliness and isolation are very real, and acutely felt.

Couldn't do nothing on the weekends, just stayed in, couldn't go out with my friends and go to the shop or anything like that, so... bit boring. (Ridge 2006: 26)

Children growing up in poverty often moderate their requests, deny their needs and wants, and self-exclude from school trips by not taking home the information, in order to protect their parents' feelings.

It was real hard... 'cos all our mates would be doing everything and we'd think – 'oh I want to do that'. We'd try and ask mum, but then we'd think, what if she says, 'well look I've only got a bit of money', then we'd feel guilty for asking, so we didn't ask her. (Ridge 2006: 26)

Living in a consumer society increases the damage and sense of losing out. It affects confidence, social development and self-esteem.

If you don't wear trendy stuff... not so many people will be your friend 'cos of what you wear. (Charlene, 12 years, two-parent family)

I can't go out and look scruffy or anything like that. I won't go out if I look scruffy, I won't do it. (Colleen, 13 years, lone-parent family) (Ridge 2002: 68–70)

Poverty often involves living in more troubled parts of cities, and children have to learn skills to deal with this. Young people learn to move about in a group, to become more safe, but then may be seen as threatening by adults. Many face the disruption of having to move house and school, which impacts on relationships, confidence and aspirations.

There is a lot of stigma attached to poverty, which particularly affects young people while they are developing identities. This can have serious impact on school learning and aspirations.

Poverty, then, affects people materially but also in their relationships and has a symbolic impact too. It is naïve to ascribe it to individual laziness, since even many graduates can't find work. People doing less skilled jobs often have to accept flexible contracts with unreliable and variable hours and rates of pay which are insufficient to keep a family. Those without work, including

mothers with young children or disabled people, have been vilified by politicians and newspapers as 'benefit scroungers'.

This chapter aims to give a broad introduction to these experiences and issues, and the challenge they present to educators. It risks simplifying a complex system of inequality which structures how young people find their places as adults in our society (see Reay 2017).

Understanding poverty and class

It is important to gain some clarity about the terms used when discussing poverty and class, and how these two concepts connect.

Firstly, we can distinguish between *absolute* and *relative* poverty. Absolute poverty is most widespread in poorer, less industrialised countries but has not disappeared here. Many children in Britain are coming to school without breakfast, do not have a hot meal during school holidays, sleep in damp or cold rooms, and are prone to respiratory diseases. Absolute poverty essentially signifies the inability to maintain your body in reasonable health.

A much larger number of children live in *relative poverty*. This concept generally means that a person can't afford an 'ordinary living pattern' - they're excluded from the activities and opportunities that the average person enjoys. It takes social expectations into account, including not being able to do the things considered normal (wear the right clothes, go on school trips, go to the cinema or swimming baths, have a family holiday). It is measured, for convenience, according to how far the family income is below national average (generally less than 60% of the median household income, adjusted for the number of family members and sometimes housing costs).

Class is an even more complex idea, and terms such as *working class* and *middle class* take on varying meanings which we need to disentangle. Traditionally, the term *working class* is applied to manual workers employed in factories or on the land, and *middle class* to people working in offices or shops or in professions such as teaching. This is extremely problematic as a division. 'The working class is not always male, brawny and handy with a sledgehammer.' (Eagleton 2011: 171) Class is not, fundamentally, a matter of lifestyle (culinary tastes, fashion preferences, accent etc.)

A good starting point is Karl Marx's (1848) argument that society was dividing more and more into two major classes, (i) those who 'own the means of production', i.e. the wealthy who own land, mines and factories; (ii) workers for wages, who have 'only their labour power to sell' and need to work for the first group or else starve. This crucial division is even clearer now, and fundamental to understanding poverty across the world. In these terms, then, not only manual workers but also so-called *middle class* secretaries, nurses and teachers belong to the second group – employees. (Of course, there are also many self-employed people who don't fit into either category, but, in Marx's

terms, the self-employed do not constitute a class because they can't organise together as an independent power in society and therefore do not collectively affect the flow of history.)

This doesn't mean that all paid workers are poor, but it does imply a vulnerability: millions of working families are not many payslips away from destitution. Under Marx's definition then, most people suffering from poverty are part of a broader working class which includes not only industrial workers, road diggers and cleaners but also nurses, classroom assistants and teachers. Most people in poverty are either working - generally in part-time or low-paid jobs - or, if unemployed, are looking for work or have a disability. Even in urban areas with very high levels of poverty, what has been called 'poor work' is more typical than permanent unemployment.

Of course some workers are more likely to be affected than others, and poverty intersects with other inequalities. Hidden racial prejudice still makes it harder to get decently-paid employment, and refugees are made particularly vulnerable. Mothers of young children often encounter prejudice when employers or managers assume they will be unreliable because of childcare needs, and part-time jobs are often paid less per hour. People with disabilities face difficulties securing jobs which they could do well if only employers would make basic adjustments.

But race, gender and disability are not the root causes. Applicants for jobs can be rejected because they are too old or because they are young: you can be turned down because you don't have the experience, so you never gain the experience. Some employers eliminate applicants with the wrong postcode because of the stigma attached to poorer neighbourhoods. People who, for various reasons, have limited school qualifications are not even shortlisted for jobs which they could do perfectly well; the formal qualifications become an arbitrary gatekeeper unrelated to the skills required for the work. Many young graduates are employed in low-paid unreliable work, for example in call centres. Manual workers with years of experience in mining, shipbuilding, steelmaking, car manufacture and other industries have ended up in long-term unemployment or poorly paid 'service work' when their workplaces were closed down or moved overseas. The heart of the problem is not the characteristic of the individual worker, but an economic and political system which fails to utilise so many people's skills, and where the few make vast fortunes out of the low pay of the many.

Recognising that people in poverty are part of a (broadly defined) working class leaves two major problems, however. Firstly, since the 1980s it has become common to label people in poverty as an *underclass*, a pejorative term. An American academic Charles Murray (1990) popularised this expression, claiming that inner cities and council estates are full of workshy men who prefer a life of crime, and promiscuous women who have children in order to live off benefits. Valuable counter-evidence can be found in research by Robert MacDonald and Jane Marsh in one of the

poorest estates in Britain, on Teesside. Through numerous interviews, these researchers showed (2005) that, despite high unemployment, these young people still want to work, settle down and raise a family. Most move between spells of unemployment and periods of 'poor work', i.e. low-paid, insecure jobs with irregular hours.

The second problem relates to the differences between so-called working-class (ie manual) and middle-class (non-manual) occupations. Although there is no fundamental difference between these two sets of workers, it has long been evident that there is a general tendency for children of white-collar or professional parents to achieve higher in education than those of manual workers. (Please note: a *tendency* does not mean that it is true of everyone, or even of most people in each group.) There are many possible explanations for this: family conversation in many professional and other white-collar families may come closer to the academic language used in school; the parents have a clearer understanding of what schools and universities expect; parents feel more confident approaching the school if things are going wrong; or family friends may serve as role models for careers which depend on academic success. There is a strong connection with parents' own levels of education: indeed a major research study in England revealed that the mother's qualifications, in particular, have the strongest correlation with the children's school attainment (Sammons et al 2008).

Thus, when we are looking into why some children are having limited success at school, including those who become disaffected, we may be looking at a complex mix of the impact of absolute poverty, relative poverty, and having parents in less skilled occupations with lower levels of education. The mix will vary in each case: some children in poverty are being brought up by a university-educated single mother who is temporarily unable to work; some children of less educated parents have grandparents or neighbours who are able to stimulate and help with schoolwork, and so on. School factors also come into play; for example where schools separate pupils into different sets or 'ability groups', there is a tendency for children in poverty to end up in lower groups, experience a more limited curriculum and internalise the label of 'low ability'.

Poverty and schooling

Britain has one of the highest levels of child poverty in Europe, and the PISA international tests show that the impact of poverty on school achievement is also quite high. This implies the need not only for government policies to lift people out of poverty, but also for teachers to be proactive in thinking about how schools can help. We are dealing with a complex problem with no easy answers, and unless teachers become informed about the issues, they may offer inadequate responses which can make the situation worse.

Problems arise from the start if we conceive of this issue in terms of derogatory stereotypes and negative views of children and families, or if we over-generalise by assuming that poverty affects every child in the same way. Such stereotypes lead to defeatism and a reinforcement of deficit understandings.

Poverty is associated with underachievement from an early age. It is clearly difficult to assess 3-to-5-year-olds, but using vocabulary acquisition and simple problem-solving, there is clearly already an impact by the age of 3 (Bradshaw 2011). We need to treat such findings with care, of course, because this is a statement about *averages*: once we start to think of all children in poverty as having low achievement or a poor start in life, there is a risk of lower expectations and teaching down to that level. Children in poverty vary even within the same family. Parental qualifications also make a difference, and roughly a third of mothers in the poorest fifth of households have Highers, A-levels or degrees, including many single parents or graduates employed below their qualification level. Again there is a danger of stereotyping, for example assuming that children in poverty aren't read to at home. Research for the Scottish Government (Bromley 2009) showed that 78% of the richest fifth look at books with their 1- and 2-year-old children every day, but so do 55% of the poorest fifth. So while we should be aware of potential disadvantage and to recognise the importance of good nurseries, we shouldn't underestimate or write off children growing up in poverty.

Unfortunately, there is also clear research to show that the achievement gap gets bigger as children proceed through school. At each stage poorer children who start off with relatively high achievement are overtaken by richer children who begin with lower achievement. For example, of children on free school meals who leave primary school in the top fifth of the population by attainment, only one in seven subsequently reaches university (Sutton Trust 2008). The reasons are complex, including experiences at school and home, not to forget the disillusionment of seeing older siblings and friends struggling to get decent work.

False trails and half truths

Explanations have changed over time for the link between poverty and low achievement (see Smyth et al 2018 for a more detailed explanation). In Victorian times it was the dominant view that working class children should have an inferior education in order to *fit* people for their *place* in society. Even in Scotland, where it was easier for talented children from poor families to get to university, the success stories were few and the majority of poorer children had a limited, short and harsh experience of education.

In the twentieth century, with the rise of trade unions and the foundation of the Labour Party, workers would no longer tolerate their children being written off like this. The ruling class soon

adopted a different discourse based on beliefs that children were born with genetically fixed levels of 'intelligence' which was mainly inherited from their parents (see Cowburn 1986). Tests were developed which claimed to measure innate intelligence rather than what children had learned at home or school, though how they could separate these factors was never explained. Not surprisingly, the children of better-off, and generally better-educated, parents performed best in these tests. The children's upbringing was ignored and assumptions made that the differences must be genetic. 'Intelligence tests' at age 10 were used to divide children into different kinds of school, largely reflecting parental occupations.

The theory of genetically fixed intelligence now has fewer adherents, for various reasons. For example It was discovered that the measured 'intelligence' of particular populations (eg Italian migrants to the USA, or conscripts to the armed forces) improved from one decade to another, contradicting its supposed innateness. Intelligence tests have to be regularly adjusted because the average score in one generation is much higher than the average in the last. Also research into separated identical twins by the very influential psychologist Sir Cyril Burt was exposed as fraudulent after his death. Belief in genetic intelligence had largely collapsed by the 1960s. Even today genome studies have only identified genetic differences which explain a tiny proportion of differences in test scores: in fact the *combined* effect of the 74 genetic variants associated with school achievement is only 0.43 per cent!

There followed a dramatic shift to explanations based on early childhood upbringing and particularly language. The major argument in Britain (Bernstein 1971) was that working-class (i.e. manual worker) families tended to talk about things which were immediately visible, using a 'restricted code' which preferred pronouns to nouns. Again this was based on flawed research: the working-class children describing what they saw in a cartoon very sensibly used pronouns because the picture story was right in front of them.

This notion of a 'restricted code' among manual worker families quickly led to a professional mythology which was deeply prejudiced. It became common for teachers to explain that working-class children didn't do well at school because their parents smacked them instead of talking to them. (Ironically, at that time, children were regularly subject to painful physical punishment while at school.) Fortunately other researchers recognised that many of the problems of restricted language occur in schools. This includes a predominance of closed questions which restrict pupils to very brief factual answers, based on memory rather than reasoning. Barnes (1969) and others saw that teachers were talking for most of the time in class, apart from when pupils were working co-operatively in small groups. Others (Labov 1969; Rosen1972) argued that people can use more

informal styles of language to pursue serious thoughts, and that many working-class communities discuss complex social and political issues.

Both these arguments - fixed innate intelligence and of a 'restricted code' of language use - may seem outdated, but they have ongoing effects. We should also consider the implications of P1 (Y1) teachers placing pupils on different tables according to 'ability'. What do they mean by *ability*? Is this an implicit belief that the children have different amounts of innate intelligence? Do teachers consider sufficiently that some children have had a very different range of early experiences, and that those who have been to museums and watched nature programmes on TV give teachers the impression of higher intelligence? Do secondary teachers examine whether some of the pupils in their class lack the *experiences* they might need to understand their teacher's' abstract language, whether it's about medieval monasteries or the solar system?

Expectations and aspirations

A common explanation of underachievement nowadays is that parents and children have low aspirations, or even that parents don't care about their children's future. It is important to examine this argument critically.

It is easy to see how these assumptions arise. Teachers staying late for parents' evening, frustrated by the absence of certain families, easily assume that the parents 'couldn't care less'. There may be all sorts of reasons, including irregular working hours, the need to look after other children, or feelings of anxiety or antipathy towards school. Some schools are more successful than others in maintaining contact, including conversations with parents in the playground, informal consultations in the classroom at the end of the day, or initiating contact by phone. Some parents are harder to reach, but we also need to recognise that some schools are more welcoming than others and are proactive in getting parents involved.

Many of the 'low aspirations' arguments fail to recognise that aspirations depend on people having realistic options. In other words, *aspirations depend on opportunities*: they are not simply a product of personal optimism. Towns which have experienced the closure of industries and high levels of unemployment are not exactly conducive to developing ambitions. People learn a kind of fatalistic coping in these environments, and high aspirations are the exception rather than the norm. A common and shared experience of closed doors, dead ends and limited prospects (Bourdieu 1977: 86) naturally affects attitudes to education, especially when it is perceived that qualifications and training don't necessarily lead to well-paid work. This combines with parents' own memories of school, often involving a lack of respect and low-level tedious learning tasks.

Arguments have been made that a ‘culture of poverty’ exists among an ‘underclass’ who supposedly prefer crime and benefits to work. Conservative politicians decided to put the squeeze on claimants and reduce benefits. Many assumed that families are poor because they are lazy. For example, the chancellor of the exchequer from 2010 George Osborne (a multi-millionaire) spoke of life on unemployment benefits as a ‘lifestyle choice’ (*Guardian* 9.9.2010). MacDonald and Marsh’s research (2005 and elsewhere) shows that, even in areas of high unemployment, people still hold on to a belief in the importance of work and caring for a family, and employ complex strategies to maintain self-respect. This ‘culture of poverty’ ideology has been reinforced by media denigration of poor families and neighbourhoods - ‘poverty porn’ such as *Little Britain*. (See the powerful treatment of this issue in Jones (2011) or Tyler 2013.) There is a constant danger of this attitude spreading into schools.

This should not lead new teachers to a sense of despair, but to a determination to challenge the situation on many fronts. Schools can play a part, for example, by creating a positive climate based on respect for children and parents. They can offer a space where parents are made welcome, and for appreciative discussions about children’s difficulties and development can take place between parents and teachers.

Too much school work has an audience of one – the teacher with her marking pen. In neighbourhoods where opportunities are bleak, it is particularly important to show that pupils’ learning is highly valued – not just through praise, but by display, reading work aloud, performance and presentation (see numerous examples in Wrigley 2000).

The meaning of culture

Culture doesn’t just mean paintings and books but a whole way of life. The habits and norms of schools, such as the emphasis on display and performances mentioned in the last paragraph, are part of a *school’s culture*.

Teachers and school leaders concerned about child poverty need to reflect carefully on the culture of their particular school. This should be part of the process of school self-evaluation, a collective process whereby questions are asked about the messages and beliefs carried by physical environment, ways of talking with children, seating arrangements, as well as about the curriculum, assessment and teaching styles.

In *Schools of Hope* (2003), I made the following suggestions for such a self-evaluation of school culture:

- examining the cultural messages of classrooms which are dominated by the teacher’s voice, closed questions and rituals of transmission of superior wisdom

- developing a better understanding of cultural difference, in order to prevent high levels of exclusion
- understanding how assumptions about ability and intelligence are worked out in classroom interactions
- discovering how assumptions about single parents, ethnic minorities and ‘dysfunctional’ working-class families operate symbolically in classroom interactions. (Wrigley 2003: 36–37)

These are particularly significant questions in relation to children growing up in poverty. It is important to understand that placing six-year-olds on the tortoise table (children are quick to see through our ingenious codes) has an impact on their self-belief and future progress. This also intersects with other dimensions of inequality; for example it is too easy to label 'backward' the child from a low-income Polish-speaking home. Why is it still possible to hear blanket remarks about everybody living in a particular neighbourhood? Habitual ways of speaking about children and families in the staffroom inevitably leak through into ways we treat pupils in class.

One very helpful theoretical treatment of culture is Bourdieu’s concept of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). His argument is that powerful social institutions such as schools tend to recognise some forms of cultural activity and ignore or denigrate others. To give a crude example, a boy having cello lessons might appear cultured, intelligent and from a ‘good family’; if another pupil has learned bass guitar from his dad, the teachers might not regard it as educationally interesting.

It is important not to misunderstand Bourdieu. He is not suggesting that some sections of society are *more* cultured than others, though it is true that money affects the opportunity to pursue cultural interests. His argument is one of recognition and misrecognition, of what matters to schools. He uses the word *capital* as a metaphor, by analogy to rich people having financial capital they can invest, because esteemed cultural attributes – the clothes we wear, the books we read, the qualifications we hold – help give access to better careers and financial prosperity.

This raises important questions about what schools recognise and misrecognise, and there have been valuable attempts to include in school learning activities which respect and build upon community-based knowledge. Moll and Greenberg (1990), for example, explored how skills are shared among immigrant Mexican families in the USA, and then worked with teachers to draw on that knowledge. Pat Thomson (2006) provides examples from Australia of how school–community projects can draw on students’ hidden knowledge; she refers to this as a ‘virtual schoolbag’. This is far more productive than thinking of the local neighbourhood as a bundle of problems.

Policy debates

Educational and social policy differs across Britain, and is affected by economic policy. The Scottish Parliament has refused to follow the punitive approach of Conservative politicians in the British Parliament, but the latter's policies on welfare apply across the UK, so Scottish families too have been subject to policy changes such as universal credit as well as reduced budgets. This has also led local councils to cut important services, including special needs support.

Sometimes policies are difficult to follow because even the hardest-hearted politician has to pretend to support social justice. One tactic is to blame teachers, saying that 'poverty is no excuse for low achievement'. Teachers are somehow expected to 'close the gap' even though families' living conditions are beyond their control. This is not to suggest that teachers should be complacent but to recognise that the causes of low achievement extend beyond the classroom.

Another feature of Conservative policy in education has been an individualistic emphasis on 'social mobility' (see Littler 2018). This is based on the myth that we are living in a 'meritocracy'. The 'social mobility' emphasis was shown when schools across the North East of England were accused of low standards because no FSM pupil had won a place at Oxford University. In fact, the odds of a FSM pupil getting into Oxford are 100 times worse than for pupils attending private schools.

Individual social mobility cannot make up for mass economic inequality.

Data collection on educational attainment generally includes comparisons between 'disadvantaged' and other pupils, but this can be extremely misleading. School data in England classifies as *disadvantaged* all pupils who have been entitled to free school meals at any point in the past six years. It fails to distinguish temporary from chronic poverty, or indicate extremes of poverty. It ignores additional data such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation which reflects, for example, housing conditions in each area. It also does not reflect levels of parental education, which is why it is misleading to compare schools in northern England with London, where nearly twice as many adults are university graduates.

Schools in England also face extreme pressures from high-stakes testing and inspection, which have led some schools to try to remove pupils who are not scoring highly. Unofficial exclusions ('offrolling') is particularly common in some academies (state-funded schools which have been transferred to private management groups). It has also led to some damaging forms of school discipline, including keeping pupils in silent isolation cells for weeks on end.

A particularly confusing debate concerns the so-called 'knowledge-based curriculum'. One version, deriving from E D Hirsch in the US, sees knowledge as long lists of facts. Pupils growing up in poverty are entitled to a breadth of knowledge, but memorising miscellaneous facts is no substitute

for understanding concepts and theories, or for experiential learning which has an emotional and sensory impact on young people. Hirsch has also been accused of bias in his selection of key knowledge by ignoring ethnic minority cultures, so we should also consider how the curriculum can respect features of local and working-class life as well as the traditional subject knowledge. For example, young people may be interested in the geography of their local neighbourhoods, discussing social divisions within their city, hearing from workers who lost their jobs when factories or shipyards were closed. There are good reasons to include such matters in the Geography, History or English curriculum.

So what can be done?

Schools can make a difference, but not *all* the difference (Mortimore and Whitty 1997). We need to be honest, and recognise that underachievement can never be adequately dealt with while child poverty continues. Many teachers in poorer neighbourhoods have become involved in local political struggles beyond the school gate to make life better, for example to pressure councils to improve housing or to reduce racism in an area.

Some schools have become aware of the very serious conditions affecting their children, and work very closely with food banks as well as providing free breakfasts (see chapter 10). One Scottish education authority has started providing free meals during school holidays. Schools are increasingly realising the need to consider poverty when charging for cookery ingredients or school trips. The initiative known as 'poverty proofing' - a kind of audit - led by Children NorthEast has helped raise awareness.

Some issues are affected by typical patterns of school organisation. For example, the standard way of organising S1–2 (Y7–8) classes, with pupils facing over a dozen teachers a week, makes it difficult for supportive relationships to develop; to change this by having some teachers covering more than one subject, and teachers working in a year team, requires a brave policy decision. Research shows that the best early years provision involves children's centres which invite parents to participate in activities so that beneficial ways of playing and talking with children can be shared and improved (Sylva *et al* 2004); such centres include book and toy libraries and the availability of advice from health professionals, for example. This clearly requires decisions by the local authority, so concerned teachers need to find ways of influencing local policy-makers. It is shocking that hundreds of these centres have been closed due to Austerity budget cuts.

Some changes need decisions at whole-school level. Practices such as taking groups of secondary students to visit universities, or bringing former students as role models to a school, need the collective decision or at least approval of staff to succeed.

There are other matters which teachers can change in their everyday classroom work, though this is more effective when two or three colleagues are collaborating; this way individuals avoid being isolated, and they can begin to have an influence on the rest of the school. A small group of committed teachers can engage in peer observation and joint planning, and find occasions for showing the results to other pupils and staff. Similarly, residential for curriculum enhancement or visits to historic sites can only become standard practice if there is a weight of staff approval.

Some US-based researchers such as Haberman (1999) have pointed to the problem known as 'pedagogies of poverty', i.e. that children in poorer neighbourhoods, and particularly lower streams and sets, are constantly subjected to low-challenge routine tasks. We urgently need school-based research in Britain which asks the same question: are some pupils receiving a debased curriculum which is dominated by filling in worksheets, closed questions, few challenges to discuss or solve problems?

One of the most important challenges for teachers is to introduce challenge and engaging tasks which are accessible to pupils with less developed core skills; basic skills of literacy or ICT need to be embedded into interesting activities, rather than endless decontextualised exercises. Literacy cannot be regarded as a set of routine 'skills' but must involve the whole person and their relationship with the world. It is revealing to question some standard patterns that we take for granted. For example, why do we assume that maths is more connected with trivial manoeuvres such as emptying baths rather than real-world problems such as income distribution or housing costs? Why do curriculum units so rarely end in a display or presentation, whether to other students or a wider audience? Why does 'problem-solving' rarely involve real problems?

Even in neighbourhoods damaged by poverty, teachers are (understandably) nervous about bringing it into the curriculum. And when they do the pupils' voices are missing, so that it ends up with moralistic advice on alcoholic abuse, unhealthy diets and early pregnancy, underpinned by deficit views of the local area and families. How children's out-of-school experiences are treated in the classroom requires delicate thought and negotiation, but young people are not served by excluding their lives and circumstances from the curriculum. They have a right, as citizens, to honest discussion about why society is so unequal and how they can change it.

These are fundamental and challenging questions, which require teachers to engage not only as individuals within classrooms, but with groups of colleagues, and networks beyond the school, as well as engaging with the wider community to inform and influence policy-makers.

Recommended readings

Susanne Gannon, Robert Hattam and Wayne Sawyer (2018) *Resisting educational inequality: reframing policy and practice in schools serving vulnerable communities* (Routledge)

Danny Dorling (2014) *Inequality and the 1%* (Verso)

Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack (2015) *Breadline Britain: the rise of mass poverty* (Oneworld)

Diane Reay (2017) *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes* (Policy Press)

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